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ABSTRACT

Directed study is an individualized on- or off-campus learning experience arranged between an undergraduate student and one or more University of Minnesota faculty members for academic credit in an area not covered by regular courses. The College of Liberal Arts Office for Special Learning Opportunities (OSLO) investigated the directed study program, and its findings are discussed together with university and CLA guidelines for faculty. The OSLO study surveyed transcripts of 100 randomly selected students in directed courses and also conducted structured interviews with 40 instructors in 24 departments, all experienced in directing individual learning projects. Questions were grouped into six general areas: establishing contact, proposal formulation, credit, evaluation, faculty time and effort, and a set of miscellaneous questions. It was found that independent study elicits greater faculty output per student than other forms of undergraduate instruction, involves more personal interaction, and requires greater effort to assign a fair grade. Approaches vary widely in terms of how instructors work with students. The directed study approach was assessed by the Senate Committee on Educational Policy as a valid alternative and supportive approach but one that should be limited, in view of its expense, in order to maintain high standards both in directed study projects and in regular courses. (LBH)

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comment
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Directed study: how instructors see it

"Directed study" is an individualized on- or off-campus learning experience arranged between an undergraduate student and one or more University faculty members for academic credit in an area not covered by regular courses. It is one of several forms of independent study offered at the University. Other forms include x registration, in which a student may earn extra credit for additional work done in conjunction with a traditional course, and y registration, in which a student may receive credit for a course without attending regular class meetings by satisfying certain other requirements such as examinations.

Directed study and other independent study, offered by the University for many years, began to grow in popularity in the late 1960's. In the College of Liberal Arts, where they are most heavily used, registration has increased 30 to 50 percent each year since 1969. In 1972-73, 1,942 University students elected directed study through CLA, and another 1,548 took other forms of independent study.

The CLA Office for Special Learning Opportunities (OSLO), under a grant from the Small Grants Program of the Council on Liberal Education, last year undertook research on directed study in that college, with questions also relating to other independent study. While the specific data is drawn from experiences of CLA instructors, it bears on questions of import to other University units as well. Therefore, this issue of Comment discusses results of the OSLO study together with University and CLA guidelines for faculty.

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• Do students earn higher grades through directed study than they do through other forms of instruction?

• If so, why? Is directed study an "easy grade?"

• How do faculty members evaluate work done for directed study projects?

• How do instructors of directed study projects determine how much credit should be given, and how much work required?

These and other questions prompted research conducted last spring by Patricia Martin Woolf, graduate assistant, and described in a recent OSLO report. The survey produced information not only about how independent study in CLA is evaluated but about procedures followed by students and instructors in establishing

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contact and developing a project. Results have been used to develop college guidelines for students and faculty who are getting involved in directed study for the first time.

The OSLO study began with a look at transcripts of 100 randomly selected students registered in directed study courses. Some 72 per cent were juniors and seniors, and had previously taken an average of five or more courses in the department in which they did the directed study. Of those surveyed, 48 per cent received an A and 20 per cent a B for the target projects. Two per cent received a C, 11 per cent a P (pass, since changed in the grading system to S or satisfactory), 18 per cent an I (incomplete), and 1 per cent a W (withdrawn).

The grades were, on average, less than one-half point higher than the students' averages for other work in the same departments. The students' averages in those departments were in turn about one-half grade higher than their overall averages.

While students were shown to earn high grades for directed study, Woolf and Don Myrvik, OSLO director, believe that faculty responses to the interview portion of the study do not support a theory that directed study is an "easy grade." It appears that students tend to take directed study in departments where they already do well, Woolf said. In addition, she hypothesizes that directed study may in some way "enhance" whatever factors are in operation to enable a student to do well in a given department. Student motivation and the overall grading patterns of departments and instructors involved with independent study also must be considered.

The second and more extensive portion of the OSLO study comprised structured interviews with 40 instructors from 24 departments, all of them experienced in directing individual learning projects. Questions were grouped into six general areas: establishing contact, proposal formulation, credit, evaluation, faculty time and effort, and a set of miscellaneous questions. In the discussion which follows, each dot (•) introduces consideration of a new question.

Establishing contact

• **Initial contact.** A number of centers on campus, such as OSLO, the Living-Learning Center in University College, and various internship programs, help students develop on- or off-campus individual learning projects. Such centers can help a student identify an appropriate faculty member to act as instructor for the project. Half the instructors interviewed prefer the student to make the initial contact, while only 8 per cent prefer someone other than the student; the rest stated no preference.

• **Acquaintance.** About half the instructors work mainly with students they already know from their classes.

• **Grade level.** Half prefer to work with upper division students, half have no preference.

• **Background.** About half prefer or require the student to have some background in the area of the proposed project.

• **Subject area.** Seventy per cent of the faculty interviewed act as instructors for independent or directed study only in their areas of specialty or in closely related areas. Fourteen per cent are willing to direct projects in other areas of personal interest. Sixteen per cent act as instructors on projects completely outside their own areas of specialty or interest, citing one of three reasons for doing so:

(a) A student wishing to do a project in a particular area has encountered lack of cooperation of a professor or department in that area.

(b) A student desires to work with that particular instructor even though the project falls outside the instructor's specialty.

(c) The instructor's interests are "wide" or "global."

• **Referral.** All of the instructors interviewed had at some time suggested that a student go to another instructor to carry out a project.

• **Matching instructors, students.** When asked what procedures should be followed in matching instructors and students, faculty members responded with a variety of spontaneous suggestions:

Students' interests should be matched to instructors' specialty or interest.

A central person should be available in each department for referral.

Instructors themselves should refer students to other instructors.

An instructor's bias, mode of operation, and personality should be taken into account.

The instructor's availability and willingness should be considered.

A centralized file of faculty interests and specialties should be established.

Students should be encouraged to "shop around" for a compatible instructor.

Instructors should feel free to say "no" to students (either because they prefer not to work with that particular project or to keep from overcommitting their time).

Formulating the proposal

The OSLO survey attempted to learn how individual faculty members work with students in setting

goals, how explicit and how precise these goals are, and whether or not written contracts are used.

• **Procedures.** Seventy per cent of those interviewed have no specific set of procedures which a student must follow in developing and carrying out a project. Nineteen per cent do favor a specific format; the rest said this varies according to the nature of the project.

• **Contract.** A full 76 per cent said they either do not like or do not require a written agreement, or contract. However, several of these formulate a verbal agreement or jot down notes during discussions with students. One reason given for not using a written contract is the difficulty of defining a project on paper before the student has begun to explore the area. Another is that an independent study project needs the flexibility to develop as the student proceeds. One-third of the 24 per cent who do require a contract do so because the department demands it; others use them only with students they do not know in advance, or because students prefer them.

• **Structure.** At the same time, 46 per cent of the instructors believe a project should be clearly and definitely structured at the beginning, and another 19 per cent said there should be at least minimal structure to the undertaking.

• **Changes.** No instructors said they would allow no changes to be made during the course of the project, although most (70 per cent) require that such changes be discussed or negotiated.

• **Assistance.** Most instructors (76 per cent) are willing to help students substantially in setting up projects. However, 22 per cent prefer merely to direct students to resources.

• **External assistance.** Some students receive either primary or supplementary assistance from advisors at OSLO, Living-Learning Center or other agencies in developing their proposals, and 35 per cent of the instructors said they like this method. (Some of these 35 per cent said such students generally have thought out their projects more thoroughly than other students, and thus take up less of the instructor's time on that aspect of the project.) Fourteen per cent of those interviewed prefer students not to work with these offices (most believe it simply is not necessary) and the rest have no preference.

• **Techniques.** Many instructors suggested techniques they had found useful in helping students formulate proposals; some of their recommendations have been incorporated into the guidelines for faculty members developed by OSLO and appearing below.

Assigning credit

• **Methods.** Several methods may be used to assign the number of credits to be earned for a particular independent study project, and instructors were asked which they rely upon. Virtually all said they attempt to match credits given to work performed.

About half said they do this primarily through

Excerpts from OSLO's 'Guidelines for New Instructors'

Independent study is a challenging educational mode for both instructor and student and it is good for both to weigh and understand the responsibilities and possibilities involved. . . .

Are you the person for the job?

Your interest is the student and what he/she wants to learn. . . . Be prepared to commit necessary time and energy to the task. . . Say "yes" when you can, but don't be afraid to say "no" if you don't have the necessary time, skill, energy or willingness. . . .

Your time and your role.

Depending on the student and the project, you may have very little involvement or you may be called upon to become intensively involved. You may need only approve an already-worked-out proposal or you may need to provide extensive help, e.g., to stimulate the student's ideas, suggest resources, suggest directions at key phases, and discuss findings, as well as evaluate the end product. . . .Whatever you decide about your time and your role, it helps the student to know clearly what your commitment involves. . . .If you feel ongoing regular meetings are important, decide on the number and make sure the student knows that you expect both of you will keep them. . . .

The proposal

Learn what kind of background the student has in the field. . . .This information could be useful in helping shape a proposal and deciding whether the student has enough skill and prior knowledge. . . .

Assess the student's motivation, intellectual maturity, and self-discipline. . . . Encouraging the student to tell you of previous learning experience and past and present goals will probably help. Independent study is a unique opportunity for special guidance for a student, which cannot be used advantageously by every student. You are one of those deciding which students will benefit most.

A major part of your job will probably be to help students to focus realistically on a manageable topic. You will probably want to help them establish a relatively fixed (but flexible) framework. . . .

negotiation with the student. This can take several forms:

(a) The student chooses the amount of credit he or she wants to work for, and the instructor tries to adjust the project so the amount of work is appropriate.

(b) The student chooses the amount of work and the instructor assigns the amount of credit.

(c) The student proposes both the amount of credit and the amount of work, and the instructor adjusts either or both as necessary.

Other instructors determine credit primarily by comparing work done through independent study to regular coursework, i.e. by basing credit on the amount of time spent on the project by the student—usually using the recommended rule of thumb that 30 hours of work equals one credit per quarter. A few correlate credit to the size of the final paper, or let the student choose the amount of credit and then determine whether a performance of that value is in fact turned in. A number commented that whatever method is used, the decision of how much credit for how much work is a difficult one.

• **Unit of work?** Instructors were asked whether they tend to think of an independent study project as a unit of work—accomplishment of objectives regardless of the time involved—or, by contrast, in terms of the number of hours put in by the student. Seventy-six per cent see the project as a unit, although many pointed out that the instructor also has some sense of the time spent and therefore actually takes both factors into account.

• **Multiple credit.** Fifty-four per cent of those interviewed believe there is or could be a problem of students using the same project to gain credit in more than one University unit. However, a number commented that pursuing the issue could imply mistrust and lack of respect for students, a situation they felt should be avoided. Almost no one who perceived a possible problem has any suggestion for countering it, although a few said they had occasionally checked to see whether a student had indeed sought credit for a project through a second unit.

Evaluating the work

Woolf questioned faculty members to learn whether, in their estimation, the special nature of independent study—such as absence of a norm group, nature of work done, or faculty-student interaction—might cause them to evaluate it somehow differently from regular coursework, in terms of either methods or standards.

• **Evaluation factors.** Faculty members were first asked to mention factors which they take into account in evaluating independent study. Eighty-four per cent said they consider the final product (several said this is the chief or only consideration, and many specified that it includes written work); 41 per cent cited the difficulty of the work, 41 per cent the amount of work, and 35 per cent the meeting of an agreed-upon goal.

Many went on to comment about other evaluation techniques: looking for evidence of a student's

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A written proposal

The student will be asked to file a proposal before departmental approval for a directed study project is given. How extensive the proposal is depends on you, the student, and the project. Its purpose is to establish goals and means. . . .It can still allow for a great deal of flexibility, if you wish it to. The Office for Special Learning Opportunities has developed an outline form to assist students in presenting a directed study or x registration proposal. . . .Instructors are welcome to use it.

Credits

Credits for independent study should be considered as equivalent to those in other forms of college level study. In the same way that you negotiate with yourself and decide on the amount of time and effort and the scope of learning to demand from a student in a course, you need to negotiate with yourself and the student to decide what is worth how many credits in independent study. The (University) Senate has provided one definition: a credit is earned for three hours of student work a week over one quarter. . . .You may have other gauges you will want to use in addition to this one.

Multiple use of single learning experiences

One misuse of independent study registration has appeared in a few cases: a student's effort to make one piece of work serve under more than one course heading. . . .Sometimes extended and supplementary accreditation may be appropriate. The answer to a request for it is not always negative, but it should be explicitly addressed.

Suggestions from some of your colleagues

The work should be continuous. . . . The student may need a little encouragement to keep the work underway.

Keep a brief ongoing record of your meetings with the student as the project progresses and your evaluation of the work and interaction with the student. . . .

You may wish to innovate on the method in which the learning is demonstrated. For example, one professor has students keep an analytical journal of readings (which) requires the student to pose and answer questions and makes a good basis for ongoing discussions between instructor and student.

Student and faculty guidelines and a suggested proposal outline may be obtained from OSLO, 225 Johnston Hall, 373-7550.

having assimilated and integrated reading material and issues, being aware of the student's progress as demonstrated in discussions throughout the project, and measuring the student's growth against his or her own standing at the beginning of the project. Several see evaluation as a very subjective process, some adding that this is true in assessing classroom work as well.

• **Evaluation methods.** Eighty-one per cent of the instructors identified a "most helpful" method of evaluation. These include, in declining order of popularity: evaluation of a written final product; consideration of both final product and the student's progress during the course of the project; final product which includes activities other than a paper or oral report, such as photographs, a film, or a model; formal presentation of paper and final interview; a paper or oral exams; interchange and exploratory discussions along the way; a paper together with information from others with whom the student is working (as in a seminar or field work position); student self-evaluation, and a student-kept journal. Most comments stressed the need for interaction with the student throughout the course of the project to gain a better idea of the student's mastery of ideas, issues, and methods.

"Least helpful" methods of evaluation: final written product alone (without ongoing faculty-student interaction); oral reports alone; number of hours put in or pages read; written exam; first impression; and student self-evaluation.

• **Different treatment?** Forty-nine per cent of the instructors have some sense that they may be treating or evaluating independent study projects differently from regular classwork; 46 per cent feel they treat the two essentially the same. The rest gave no answer or said it "depends."

Those who sense a difference nearly all believe that added effort on the part of the instructor is required to arrive at a fair and equitable grade for independent study. Of this group, about a third think an instructor is more likely to give fair and accurate grades in a class situation because of more regular contact with students, standardized exams, or the less personal nature of faculty-student interaction. Another third believe they are generally more demanding of independent study students. The same fraction believe they may be less demanding, either intentionally (because students have less time, or less access to guidance than those in classes which meet regularly) or unintentionally (because of personal involvement with the student and the project). Those who perceive unintentional discrepancies in their own standards often commented that they are troubled by this and consciously attempt to minimize it.

Five per cent believe that the grade given for independent study may actually be more accurate than that for classwork because the instructor gains more information about the student doing independent study through personal interaction.

Those who believe they evaluate independent study and classwork on essentially the same basis said this is so either because both require the same basic skills or because the instructor makes a concerted effort to equalize the two.

Time and effort

Faculty members tend to agree that supervising independent study is a time-consuming activity. Approaches, however, vary widely and depend on individual projects.

• **Meetings.** About a third of those interviewed average two to four meetings per quarter with each independent or directed study student; another third average five to ten meetings. The rest gave no specific average. Just over half did not suggest an optimum number of meetings; 38 per cent thought five to ten meetings per quarter would be best, and 11 per cent chose two to four meetings per quarter. Many pointed out that fewer meetings are required for students doing reading than for other kinds of activity. Some said they meet with students less often than they would like because of limitations on their own time; more said the use of meetings is limited because students simply do not come in. One said instructors are not adequately forewarned by the University as to how much time such supervision will require.

• **Faculty effort.** Fifty-four per cent said they put in more effort per student in independent study than in either lower or upper division undergraduate courses. Only 5 per cent said they put in less effort per student. The rest said it depends (for example, on the kind of project or the kind of class) or gave answers which might mean their effort is greater in at least some situations.

• **Value to student.** A fourth of the instructors said they believe students gain more from working with them in independent study than from a typical course. Another fourth said the outcome depends upon the student, and 11 per cent said the gain is about equal. Only 5 per cent believe the student gains less from independent study, saying lack of motivation can cause the student to accomplish little. Sixteen per cent said independent study is valuable as a supplement but should not substitute for regular coursework, particularly because a student can become too involved in depth rather than breadth of pursuit. The rest gave other answers,

among them that only the student can judge the value of independent study.

Miscellaneous questions

• **Completion.** Eighty-nine per cent of the instructors said most of their students complete their projects. Freshmen and sophomores generally have the lowest rate of completion.

• **Approval.** Twenty-two per cent of the instructors reported that projects must be approved by someone else in the department, as a department chairman or a review committee. For the rest, approval is not required or is a mere formality. Several criticized the rubber stamp procedure as a waste of time. Many also said they oppose or would oppose an actual departmental review procedure as imposing on their academic prerogatives.

• **Faculty roles.** Seventy-eight per cent of the faculty members said they generally fulfill all of five roles when supervising independent study: serve as catalyst-stimulator, suggest resources, discuss findings, suggest directions at key stages, and evaluate the end product. There is no pattern among roles not fulfilled.

• **Experiential learning.** Asked whether experiential learning should qualify as an independent study project for academic credit, 14 per cent said yes, with no qualifications (nearly all because of the nature of the instructor's specialty). Seventy-eight per cent said yes but with qualifications; the qualification mentioned most often was that the student should also show evidence of analysis and evaluation of the experience. The rest said no or only rarely, or gave no answer.

What emerges from the study is the instructor view that independent study elicits greater faculty output per student than other forms of undergraduate instruction, involves more personal interaction, and requires greater effort to assign a fair grade. Approaches vary widely in terms of how instructors work with students in developing proposals, negotiating or assigning credit and amount of work, assessing progress, and evaluating the project.

The Senate Committee on Educational Policy (SCEP), last spring called directed study "a valid alternative and supportive approach" to regular courses, and recommended "maximal flexibility in the design of such projects" consistent with maintenance of high academic standards.

The SCEP statement, approved by the University Senate, calls for faculty-student agreement on objectives, procedures, and evaluation methods at the outset of the project; the agreement should be in writing for use in evaluation as well as departmental review of the project. Faculty members should record time spent directing such projects to permit acknowledgement and reward of their efforts. Noting that directed study is an expensive form of education, the committee said department faculties may find it necessary to limit the number of projects to maintain high standards both in directed study projects and in regular courses.

comment

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